

Christmas Eve

Juleaften

WHO cannot call to mind a storm, a tempest
So fierce he thinks that Heaven no worse can send!
A tumult as tho' every soul, from Cain's
To the last one God doomed, escaped from Hell,
All cursed the Earth which made them give up Heaven? . . .

A storm whose voice can never be forgot.
All thought: it must be sent because of *me*;
At me the thund'ring hurricane is aimed;
My sin has become known unto the spirits . . .

A storm whose might can teach both priest and flock
To worship demons in that element
Whose crash the old man e'er from childhood hears . . .
A cloud-quake, a last judgment in the airs? . . .

A storm which shook the stout heart in its stronghold,
When thro' the uproar his own name was called
By spirits carried past him on the wind,
Whilst every tree-top like a raven screamed.

But in the rocks the raven hid; the wolf
His hunger tamed; nor ventured forth the fox.
Indoors no lights were lit, the dog let in . . .
In such a storm thou gettest prayers, God!

In such a storm — it was the Eve of Christmas —
When the tall night o'erstrode the cowering day —
Thro' Sweden's wilderness, the Tivéd forest,
An old Jew heavily was plodding onward —
Awaited in the villages on this side
From those beyond the forest, now for Christmas,
By maids full many longingly. His knapsack
Held brooches, ribbons, and what else was wanted
For coming days of Christmas and New Year.
Their longing knew suspense, but never fear;
For never had Old Jacob disappointed
Them any Christmas yet: he came as sure
As Christmas Eve itself.

In such a night . . .

'Hush! Was't again the tempest
Howling thro' branches? Was it not a cry? . . .
Ah, there again! Straightway Old Jacob stops,
And with strained sense listens a second time.
'Tis heard no more. For now the storm increases,
Thund'ring like cataract on him who's drowning.
He presses on. 'Hush! There again a sound!'
A sound that rose above the forests roaring.
'The false owl cries just like a little child.
Who in such weather would allow their child
To roam? The she-wolf wouldn't let her whelps!'
Again the old man weary totters onward.
Again it cries, and he can doubt no more:
This whirlwind which already over yonder
A winding snow-tower o'er the forest flings,
Has born a *word*, one single word, along.
At once he turns to whence he heard it come,
Working his way deeper into the forest,
Deeper into the snow, into the night,
Rearing like mountain-wall against his steps,
By instant-passing snow-gusts bleakly lighted,
As if the whole white forest were one horde
Of flying, whirling, veiled ghosts and spirits,
Who howling rose each moment on his way;
On airy toe they spun, horribly growing —
And then were gone between the rooted trees.

Still the old man fights on against the tempest,
Advancing when it waxes; when it wanes —
Drawing its breath — he listens on his knees.
Anon he rises, penetrates the darkness,
As delving dwarf works thro' the pitchy mould.
. . . . No more he hears no more.
The old Jew-trembles,
Thinking that evil spirits him do fool,
And mumbles forth the prayers that he knows.
Then 't whines again, surely this time quite near.
His own call 'gainst the storm is carried back
Into his mouth. But there! look there! Ah, there,
Ten paces more! There something dark is moving
Upon the snow, as if the storm were jostling
A stump, a little loosened at the root.

'An arm! Jehovah! 'tis a child — but *dead!*'
Ah! Did the stars of heaven on this dark night,
When 'mongst them shone the Star of Bethlehem,
Think that no good on earth could e'er be done?
None of them saw this instant how Old Jacob,

As glad as tho' he had a treasure found,
Threw down at once his riches all, the knapsack;
Pulled off his narrow coat, carefully wrapped it
About the lost child's limbs; then bared his breast
And laid its cold, cold cheek up to it close,
Until it woke up from his own heart-beat.
Then up he sprang. But whither now? The storm
Has covered up his track. What did he care?
For in the thund'ring of the forest tree-tops
He heard the harps of David jubilant.
The stormy gusts seemed to him lofty cherubs,
Who, borne on snow-white wings, pointed the path;
And on his random, winding way he felt
The gentle strong pull of the Lord's own hand.

But how to find a house in the wild Tivéd
In such a night, when lights durst not be burnt?
Half-way across there was a lonely cottage,
Whose low roof could not be distinguished from
The snow, nor its black wall from the bare rock.
As by a miracle he was stopped by it.
There, utterly exhausted, sank he down;
And many a snow-spray flew ere he was able
To trail him with his burden to the door.
He gave a gentle knock — the child was sleeping,
Then he discovered he had lost his knapsack,
As he had nothing now at all to offer
The good poor people who would run to open
Their door with hospitable haste. Alas,
Full many a time he knocked, ere came the answer:
'In our Lord's name who's there on such a night? '
'It is Old Jacob. Don't you recognise me?
The old Jew?'
'Jew!' thereat cried terror-stricken
Together a man's and a woman's voice.
'Then keep outside! We nothing have to pay with.
Misfortune shouldst thou bring into our house,
This night when *He* was born thou slewest!'
'I? '
Yea, thy people — and that is the sin
Thro' thousand generations to be punished.'
'Alas! To-night the dog is let in!'
"Yes,
The dog, but no Jew in a Christian house.'

He heard no more. The cruel, cruel words
Cut thro' him keener than the winter wind,
And, stronger than the wind, they threw him down
Down in the snow, bent o'er the slumbering child.
Then, as toward the window he did turn
His gaze — expecting that the white face might
Appear again — it seemed as tho' in down
He sank, and that delicious warmth flowed thro'
His veins, and that known beings, gently whisp'ring,
Like to the summer wind in grassy harp,
Flitted about his couch, till one of them
Said with raised, warning finger: 'Come! He sleeps!'
And in a bright-illuminated hall beside
They disappeared; only the child remained,
Drawing the pillows ever closer round him,
Until it seemed to him he fell asleep.
The snow was softly burying the dead.

'O Jesus! There the Jew is sitting still!"
The man cried, as he looked out in the morning.
'Well, chase him then! Why, it is Christmas Day!"
Chimed in his wife. 'Look at the greedy Jew,
How hard he draws his bundle to his breast!"
'Importunate as ever with his ware,
Staring in at the window with fixed look,
As if we had the money for to buy.'
'I shouldn't mind seeing what he has got tho' . . . '
'All right, Jew, let us see!"

The pair stepped out.
They saw the frozen gleam in the dead eyes.
More pale grew they than he, they cried in fear
And trembled with remorse. 'O Lord! O Lord!
What a misfortune this!" They raised him up;
The bundle followed; loosened next his coat.
There hung, with arms locked round the old Jew's neck,
Margretha, their own child, a corpse like him.
So swiftly strikes no lightning, darts no adder,
As pain and horror hit the couple home.
The snow was not so pale as was the father;
The storm did not wail louder than the mother.
'Oh, God has punished us! The storm has not,
But our own cruelty has killed our child!
In vain, alas! — as on our door he knocked —
We at the door of Mercy too shall knock
In vain' . . .

When through the forest road again was broken,
A man came from the farm where Gretha lived
(The little girl was quartered on a farmer's)
And whence she, as the Christmas bells were sounding,
Ere the storm came had wandered by herself
To see her parents dear on Christmas Eve.
He did not come to ask about the child,
But for the Jew, from all the village girls,
Whose hopes to go to church were now relayed
To New Year's Day — that is, if he were found.

There lay he, stretched a corpse before the fire.
His host, with gaze as frozen as the Jew's,
His body bent and crooked like the corpse,
Sat staring stiffly into the red embers,
And ever stirring, nourishing the fire,
To get it straightened out, and the hands folded.
In front of them Margretha's mother knelt,
Folding the stiff arms of her little one
Tighter and tighter round the dead man's neck.
'She does no more belong to us,' she sobbed,
'For he has bought our child by his own death.
We dare not now take little Gretha from him;
For she must beg for us of our Lord Jesus
His intercession; to His father
The poor Jew will complain . . . '

Henrik Wergeland 1842
English translation: Illit Gröndahl 1919